

“Every child should be given the opportunity to learn to swim, yet mine was refused”

An evaluation of swimming lessons for children with disabilities.



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helping special children shine

Executive Summary

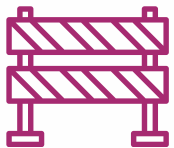
★ Sparkle delivers specialist swimming lessons for children with disabilities in hydrotherapy pools at Serennu Children's Centre in Newport and Crownbridge Special School in Cwmbran.

★ An evaluation of one 10-week block of lessons at Serennu Children's Centre was conducted by Sparkle and Disability Sport Wales between March and May 2024.

 **58**

family-carers of children accessing the lessons took part

81% of family-carers said there were barriers to accessing community-based swimming lessons, including inappropriate environments, inadequately trained staff, and no 1:1 support in the water



★ Family-carers reported small improvements to swimming ability and water safety after 10 lessons.

95% 

of family-carers said their child enjoyed being in the water in Serennu

★ Suggestions and recommendations for increasing access to community-based lessons were made, based on family-carer responses.

[He] can swim in a judgement free environment, where every child there has a disability. [He] feels like an equal and it's built his confidence in his abilities.

Introduction

Sparkle (South Wales) aims to ensure children and young people with disabilities and/or developmental difficulties, and their families, are fully supported and have access to the same range of opportunities, life experiences and activities as any other child and their family. The charity is partnered with Serennu, Nevill Hall and Caerphilly Children's Centres and supports children aged 0-17 years with disabilities, and their families, living in Newport, Torfaen, Monmouthshire, Blaenau Gwent and Caerphilly.

Sparkle delivers specialist leisure activities for children who cannot access mainstream play clubs, youth clubs or swimming lessons due to their complex needs. The charity also provides holistic support for the child's whole family, from emotional and practical support for parents and carers, liaison between families and health, social care and education services, to fun events for children, siblings, parents/carers and grandparents. The children supported have a variety of diagnoses, including (but not limited to) autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other neurodevelopmental disabilities, Down's syndrome, cerebral palsy, and rare genetic conditions. The children have profound needs due to their disabilities; many require 1:1 or even 2:1 support, are non-verbal or have significant communication difficulties, experience challenging behaviours, and/or have medical conditions which require constant monitoring, medication, specialist equipment, and assistance with personal care.

Drowning is one of the leading causes of child trauma-related death; in 2022 there was a 46% increase in the number of child drownings in the UK, compared to the 5-year average*. Swimming is a potentially life-saving skill, and one which opens up a variety of fitness and leisure opportunities. Although it is stated by the Department of Education in Wales that swimming and water safety are compulsory parts of the national curriculum in primary school**, it is evident that this is not a reality for many children who have additional needs due to physical, developmental or neuro-disability.

Sparkle delivers specialist swimming lessons from hydrotherapy pools at Serennu Children's Centre in Newport and Crownbridge Special School in Cwmbran. These lessons are available to children with disabilities living in Newport, Torfaen, Monmouthshire and Blaenau Gwent. A hydrotherapy pool is used as the higher temperatures improve mobility and reduces muscle spasm for those with certain disabilities, e.g., cerebral palsy, and other health conditions; the facilities are also fully hoisted, provide accessible changing spaces and a quiet and calm environment. Sparkle works with CB Training to provide experienced, Autism Swim approved swim instructors, and employs lifeguards with awareness and understanding of disabilities, complex needs and communication disorders, and specially trained Aquatic Helpers who provide 1:1 support for children in the pool. Children are grouped into swimming classes based on their level of swimming ability, as assessed by CB Training.

Specialist disability swimming lessons are one of the most frequently requested services within Sparkle. During the academic year 2023/24, 84 children participated in swimming lessons, and 146 children were on a waiting list to receive a place in these lessons. Due to the ever-increasing waiting lists, Sparkle recently asked families accessing, or on a waiting list for, the charity's specialist lessons whether their child had tried accessing inclusive swimming lessons in their local communities. The vital necessity of specialist swimming lessons is highlighted by a comment made by one family-carer, noting the desperate need for children with disabilities to be water-safe.

I consider learning to swim a vital skill in this day and age. It can save your life and the lives of others. At this point I think it important to mention there is a canal at the bottom of our garden. Now [my child] knows not to go near this but as a parent of an autistic child you never know. In the event of [him] falling into water, I would at least like him to be able to get himself to safety.

(Response 1)

*Source: <https://www.rlss.org.uk/drowning-facts>

**Source: [https://www.swimwales.org/cy/dysgu-nofio/nofio-ysgol/#:~:text=](https://www.swimwales.org/cy/dysgu-nofio/nofio-ysgol/#:~:text=The%20integration%20with%20the%20National,point%20in%20key%20Stage%202.)

[The%20integration%20with%20the%20National,point%20in%20key%20Stage%202.](https://www.swimwales.org/cy/dysgu-nofio/nofio-ysgol/#:~:text=The%20integration%20with%20the%20National,point%20in%20key%20Stage%202.)

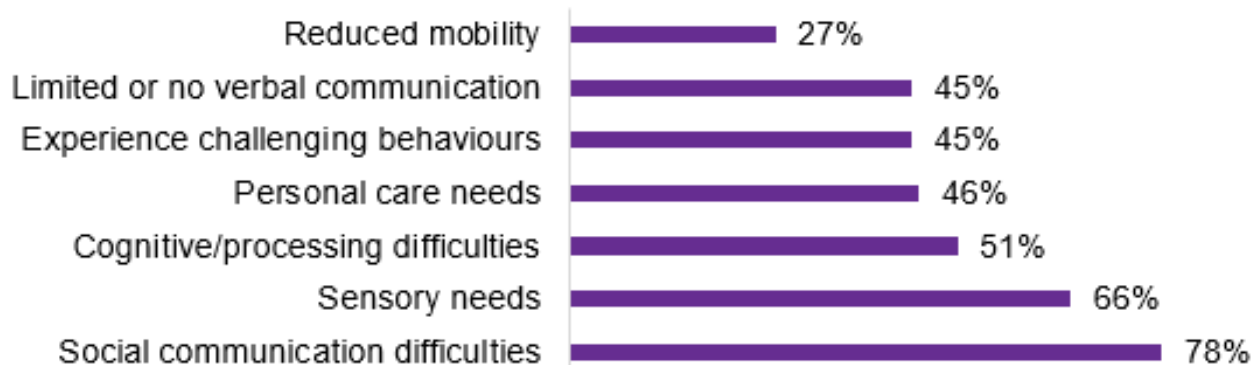
What did we do?

Between March and May 2024, Sparkle and Disability Sport Wales conducted an evaluation of swimming lessons at Serennu Children's Centre in Newport. Researchers attended the first lesson in a block of 10 and asked family-carers to complete a brief survey regarding their child's experience of water and access to swimming lessons. Researchers provided a QR code so that family-carers could complete the survey on their own device during the lesson, and shared the survey via Parent Mail with family-carers who were not present. This was repeated during the last lesson in the block. The evaluation was approved by Aneurin Bevan University Health Board Research and Development department on 7th February 2024. We combined the findings with the responses Sparkle received from family-carers about their experiences of swimming lessons in the community.

Who took part?

There were 72 children, aged 5-17, accessing swimming lessons at Serennu Children's Centre at the time of the evaluation. Both surveys were completed by 58 family-carers, and Sparkle received 21 email responses from family-carers of children accessing, or on the waiting list, for specialist lessons.

Children's Complex Needs



What happened when children with disabilities tried community-based lessons?

Lack of understanding and support

His autism was seen as bad and naughty behaviour so [he] was frequently made to sit at the side of the pool. This caused distress and upset for [my child] who felt that no one understood him. [...] his confidence was low and he was afraid of the water.

(Response 1)

Half of the children included in the evaluation had previously accessed community-based swimming lessons. The majority of family-carers described negative experiences, largely due to a lack of skilled one-to-one support in the pool. Even when specialist support was offered, family-carers felt instructors did not have an adequate level of understanding of their child's needs. Many raised that there was a lack of understanding regarding disability, and how to support children with disabilities to engage in lessons, amongst lesson providers.

"The teacher was lovely, but I feel lacked understanding of [her] needs and wasn't prepared to slow to a pace [my child] was comfortable with. [My child]'s trust was broken when the teacher pulled [her] into the pool on one occasion when she didn't want to go in." (Response 20)

It was felt that large group settings were not suitable for children with disabilities; not only did busy environments and noise lead to sensory

difficulties, but children with disabilities felt singled-out and left behind as they did not progress as quickly as the other children in their classes.

“Many group sessions are completely unsuitable for children with additional needs. [My child] attended a local swim school, which ran group sessions of 4 children to 1 instructor. The class was focused on different aspects each week and the turnover of children as they developed and moved up classes was far faster than [my child] could achieve. His confidence was taking a huge knock, as he struggled to keep up with the other children. He was also the oldest in his group and he found that very hard. [...] These schools were fantastic schools, with great recommendations and I could see that neurotypical children were thriving; however, for children who need more flexibility, small classes and a quieter environment, they were just not suitable. There are many swim schools that claim to be inclusive of disabilities, but the truth is they simply can't be whilst running classes with neurotypical children.”
(Response 3)

Inappropriate environments and facilities

Didn't like it, too noisy, too many children, lack of supervision, not enough staff, didn't understand my son's needs.

For some children, the environments in community pools were not conducive to their learning or wellbeing. Some settings lacked adequate facilities for children with disabilities, and even when the appropriate facilities were available, there could be a lack of awareness amongst staff of facilities and equipment required to make spaces accessible.

“She also needs a hoist to get in and out of the pool as she gets larger. I have found other pools in the area do not have the appropriate manageable steps to get in or out or a hoist. In the past, even in pools which have claimed to be disabled friendly such as the Spytty pool, I found that staff were either unaware of a disabled change room or told me it was out of order and that there was no equipment or staff able to use it.” (Response 15)

Feeling unwelcome

We accessed swim lessons run in Newport and were asked to decide if it was in his best interests to stay when everyone in his group was moving to the next badge! And he wasn't progressing like 'normal children' and other parents felt he was a distraction to their children with his arm flapping etc. I felt mum shamed and never returned.

(Response 13)

Family-carers were often made to feel unwelcome and that they should not return to community lessons due to their child's needs.



What barriers to community-based lessons exist for children with disabilities?

Availability of suitable lessons

She was refused to take part in the year 4 3-week swimming course at her previous primary school. I felt they could have arranged for me to take her in as the walk there was too risky, also the teaching support could have given her 1-1 [support] in the water. It's on the curriculum that every child should be given the opportunity to learn to swim yet mine was refused.

Many family-carers had not been able to find suitable local swimming lessons for their child, and described barriers such as the high cost of one-to-one support, specialist sessions being at inconvenient times (such as the last session of the day), and long waiting lists.

Stunningly, multiple family-carers reported their child being denied access to swimming lessons due to their disabilities. This happened in school settings, despite swimming and water safety being a mandatory part of the curriculum, as well as community-based lessons. This means that children at the highest risk of drowning, due to their lack of awareness of danger, are being explicitly excluded from the opportunity to gain essential water safety.

"I wanted [my child] to start swimming lessons with the council when he was 4/5 as my daughter did but I was told that because he needed a 1-1 at school he wouldn't be able to, 'It wouldn't be safe'.

I offered to get into the pool with him during a lesson (I have a full enhanced DBS) but was told this wouldn't be possible. So [my child] was refused access to swimming lessons with the council/Newport Live and unfortunately I can't comment on whether they might have worked because he was not allowed to access them.” (Response 10)

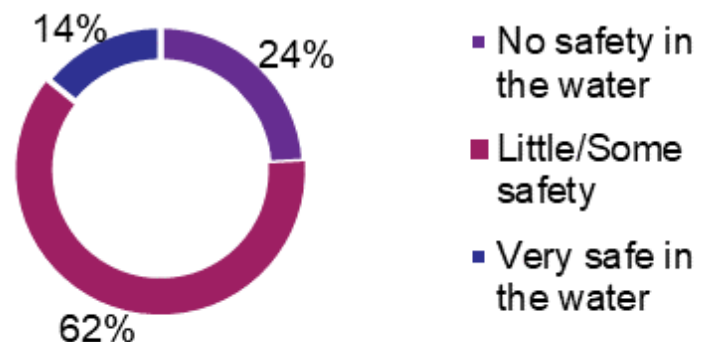
What impact do Sparkle lessons have?

Water safety

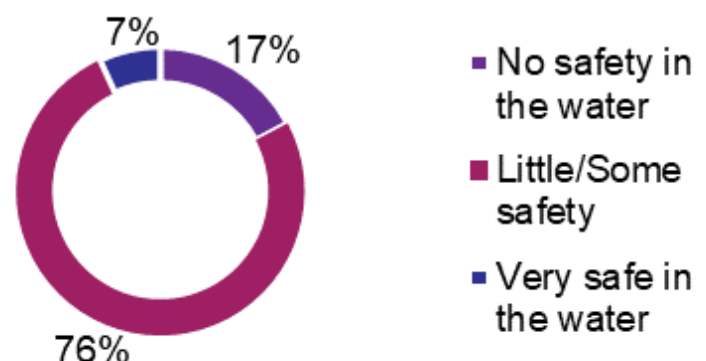
Reassuringly, there was a reduction in the number of children with no knowledge of water safety and an increase in the number of children with little or some knowledge of water safety during the evaluation of a 10-week block of Sparkle swimming lessons. These results highlight how important the swimming lessons are to increasing children's safety and potentially reducing the risk of them getting into trouble in water. However, the percentage of family-carers who felt their child was 'very safe in the water' reduced over this time. One potential explanation for this is an increase in family-carers' awareness of what a confident and safe swimmer looks like, and therefore recognition that their child requires further instruction and support to reach this stage.

It's an opportunity to learn life-saving skills in safe environment.

Water Safety - Baseline



Water Safety - Follow-up



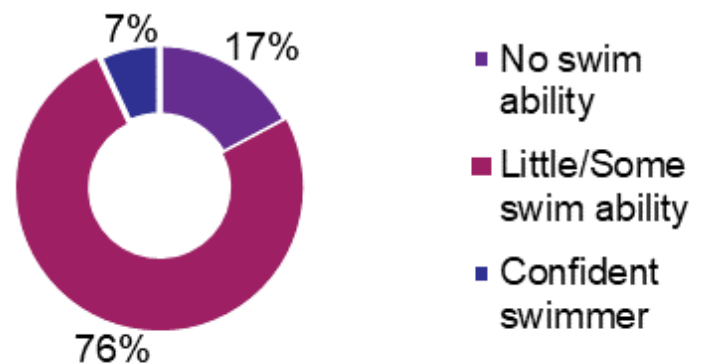
The Rockhopper Stages, used by CB Training at Sparkle lessons, are specifically tailored to learners with disabilities, with earlier stages having learning outcomes such as entering the water with support, moving limbs in the water and showing enjoyment of being in the water. Rockhopper stage 3 includes moving 5 metres through the water on the front or back, and being able to roll from back to front and front to back; it could be considered that these skills would help keep a child safe in water, however the level at which children are considered 'water safe' is difficult to determine and each child will progress through the stages at their own pace.

Swimming ability

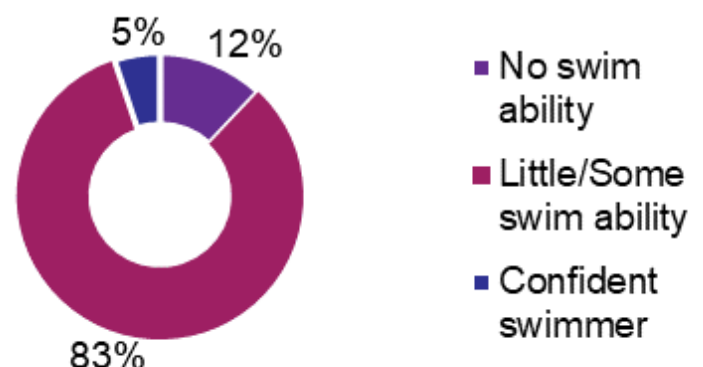
Family-carers were asked to rate their child's swimming ability during the first survey and during the second survey approximately 10 sessions later. There was a slight reduction in the percentage of children with no swim ability and increase in the percentage of children with little or some swim ability. However, it is unlikely that 10 weekly sessions would have a significant impact on swim ability, and there was a slight reduction in the percentage of family-carers rating their child as a 'confident swimmer'. This, along with positive comments from family-carers about their child's progress, suggests swim ability may fluctuate over this short period of time.

[She] would barely get in the water before sparkle lessons, she now enters the water independently and is growing in confidence with every session.

Swimming Ability - Baseline



Swimming Ability - Follow-up



At the end of the 10-session block the evaluation took place, all children accessing lessons at Serennu Children's Centre (72) were assessed and awarded badges and certificates based on the achievements they had made over the previous two blocks (20 lessons). The badges and certificates awarded are detailed below. Some children were awarded multiple badges due to overlap between the awards (e.g., they may have achieved a Swim Wales stage badge and a distance badge), however 88% of the 72 children were awarded at least 1 badge, therefore demonstrating progression since their last assessment.

Rockhopper Stage	Awards		Swim Wales Stage	Awards		Distance	Awards
RH Stage 1	0		SW Stage 1	9		5m	12
RH Stage 2	3		SW Stage 2	12		10m	8
RH Stage 3	4		SW Stage 3	7		15m	0
RH Stage 4	5		SW Stage 4	1			
RH Stage 5	11						
RH Stage 6	4						
RH Stage 7	4						



Find out more... 

More information about the **Rockhopper stages** can be found here:
<https://www.sta.co.uk/international-learn-to-swim-programme/additional-programmes/rockhopper-series/>

More information about the **Swim Wales stages** can be found here:
<https://www.swimwales.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Wave-Outcome-Posters-2020-1.pdf>

Enjoyment

They mean everything to us as a family. He enjoys coming each week, he loves swimming and getting the 1:1 support he needs. We would not be able to get this anywhere else.

The children and young people accessing the specialist swimming lessons clearly love spending time in the water, as when completing both surveys, 95% of family-carers said their child enjoyed water.

Improved family life

She has progressed so much since starting swimming lessons with Sparkle. It means we can go swimming as a family and she can enjoy ability appropriate water slides/activities on holiday.



Family-carers have told Sparkle previously that they simply could not go on holiday anywhere near a body of water, such as a pool, pond or the sea, due to their child's complete lack of water safety. The increased water confidence from Sparkle swimming lessons has led to new opportunities for exercise, social interaction and quality family experiences.

Family-carers also described the supportive, non-judgemental space at Sparkle's swimming lessons, where everyone is equal and facilities and staff provide the support children need to excel.

What makes the Sparkle swimming sessions special?

The environment

Sparkle swim lessons are incredible. The facility is ideal, the pool size isn't overwhelming and the changing facilities are totally inclusive. The ability for [my child] to have a 1:1 session, but also be around peers to observe and draw confidence from is invaluable.

(Response 20)

Many family-carers commented on how conducive the environment and atmosphere are to their child's learning; the small groups and appropriate facilities were commended, as well as supportive and calm environments.

The focus

Serennu swim sessions are not about the badges and how quickly [our child] can learn to swim, but for him to gain that water confidence in a safe and nurturing environment.

(Response 3)



Family-carers felt the specialist lessons focused less on badges and progression and instead promoted water safety and confidence.

The support

The staff are amazing. They're patient, understanding and kind, and each one has really earned [my child]'s trust. It's thanks to them entirely that [my child] is now more confident in the water and is making real progress with this absolutely invaluable life skill.

(Response 20)

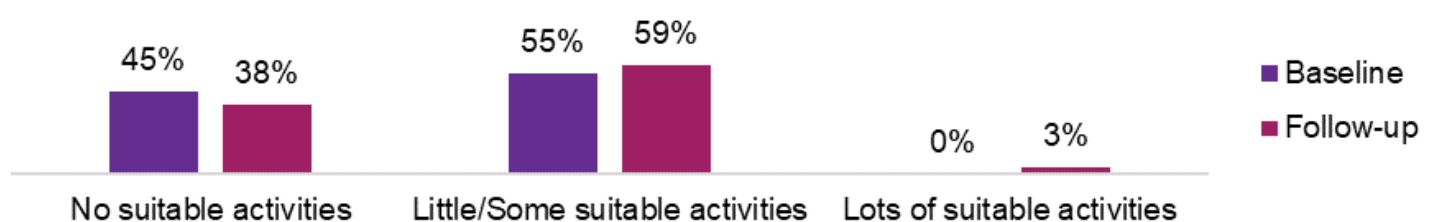
It seems the most important aspect of the lessons were the 1:1 support in the pool and the level of training and understanding amongst staff.



Does accessing Sparkle lessons open up new opportunities for children with disabilities?

Guidance published in 2022 from the Chief Medical Officer recommended that children with disabilities participate in 120 to 180 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every week, as exercise can improve confidence and concentration for children with disabilities and help them meet new people*. Family-carers were asked to rate the availability of suitable exercise/physical activities and suitable social opportunities for their children. After 10 Sparkle swimming sessions, the availability of suitable exercise/physical activity opportunities improved slightly, which may suggest that developing swimming skills with Sparkle opened up some other exercise opportunities and physical activities. However, there was no clear improvement to the availability of suitable social activities following the 10-session block.

Availability of Suitable Exercise/Physical Activities



*Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-guidelines-to-support-disabled-children-to-be-more-active>

How can community and leisure service providers break down barriers?

During the second survey of the evaluation, 34% of family-carers said they would consider their child accessing community-based swimming lessons since accessing lessons with Sparkle. However, 81% still said there were challenges or barriers to overcome for their child to access community-based lessons. We have made the following recommendations for overcoming these barriers and suggestions for improving community-based swimming lessons based on responses from family-carers.

Community and leisure service providers need:

- ★ To offer small group lessons with 1:1 support to create calm, quiet and supportive environments.
- ★ Specially trained staff with an awareness of different disabilities and how to support children with different needs in the water, including non-verbal communication and ASD.
- ★ To have appropriate facilities at pools, including hoists, spacious changing rooms which offer privacy, changing facilities for wheelchair users, and appropriate changing beds. Staff need to be aware of these facilities and trained in how to use the equipment.
- ★ Higher pool temperatures for those with heart conditions, muscle problems and reduced mobility. Pool temperatures need to be between 32 and 33 degrees.
- ★ To increase awareness and the communication of suitable opportunities for children with disabilities. This includes the marketing, awareness of staff at reception, and making the general public aware that these sessions exist.
- ★ To reduce waiting list to allow children to join sessions within an appropriate time frame.

Conclusions

This evaluation found that even one block of specialist swimming lessons provided by Sparkle resulted in small improvements to swim ability and water safety. Families really value the specialist swimming lessons, which improve their child's water confidence and enjoyment of water, particularly through the support and encouragement from specially trained staff providing 1:1 support. The facilities, accessibility and non-judgemental environment with other children with disabilities also resulted in positive outcomes for the children and their families.

Families face multiple barriers in trying to access community-based lessons, due to a lack of staff training and understanding, lack of appropriate facilities, and unsuitable group environments. Some family-carers even reported their child being denied access to lessons due to their complex needs, including those provided through school. Thus, despite swimming and water safety being a mandatory part of the primary school curriculum, disabled children are being put at even higher risk of drowning than their non-disabled peers.

Suggestions and recommendations for removing barriers to community-based lessons for children with disabilities were shared by family-carers; however, at this time, it is evident that there is an urgent requirement for government funding and support for specialist swimming lessons for those children whose needs cannot be met in a mainstream community environment.

